



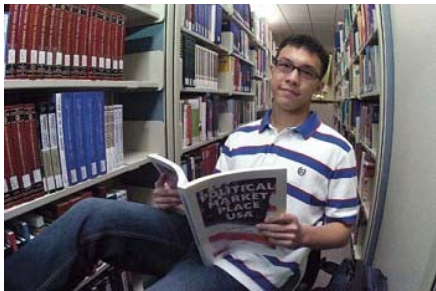
West Valley VIEW

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The road less traveled: Teen skips high school, graduates from college

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Zachary Chia won't be able to drive to his graduation at Estrella Mountain Community College.

The 15-year-old hasn't even had time to get his learner's permit yet. He's been too focused on his college career.

That's right, college. When his peers are graduating from high school in a couple of years, he plans to be graduating from ASU with a bachelor's degree.

At 14 years old, he took the bold step to skip high school altogether and apply as a full-time college student instead. He spent a few months at Millennium High School in Goodyear before trading in high school for college life.

ZACHARY CHIA, 15, will be graduating from Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale with an associate degree tonight. The teenager, who skipped high school altogether, will go on to Arizona State University in Tempe in the fall.

"I'm sure I missed a lot, I missed all of high school," he said.

Zachary doesn't have regrets, though.

"I got a head start," he said.

Zachary spent most of his childhood in China and his family felt the school system just didn't work well for him when they moved to Arizona.

"Basically, my parents told me I should just go to college instead of high school at that point," Zachary said.

He took the placement exams at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale. The family met with Dean of Student Services Lauren Shellenbarger.

"He scored really well on all of the placement tests so we were able to take him as a special-admissions student," she said. "He wanted to go full time."

Zachary's parents were at every meeting and supported him as he chose the classes he was interested in and navigated the college process, Shellenbarger said.

Many high school students take some college credits concurrently. Not many skip high school all together. Federal financial aid is not available for students as young as Zachary to attend college.

2 steps forward

If it weren't enough that Zachary is Estrella Mountain Community College's youngest graduate, he's also gone above and beyond in another way. He has earned two diplomas.

The 15-year-old will walk at graduation at 6:30 tonight at Goodyear Ballpark, receiving an associate of arts degree as well as an associate of business degree.

"He's taken a lot more courses in a semester than the average student," Shellenbarger said. "He's very persistent. And his parents are amazingly supportive of him."

Zachary is confident about continuing with his education and said his age hasn't held him back. Like most 15-year-olds, though, he really isn't certain what kind of career he wants.

He's interested in business and tourism and will go to Arizona State University with that focus. He is looking forward to living at the Tempe campus, even though he'll only be 16 years old.

"People don't really know how young I am unless I tell them," he said. "I blend in."

The only challenge was getting used to the independent atmosphere of college after moving back to Arizona from China and spending a few months in high school. He said he didn't mind putting a lot of effort into school, though.

"I'm usually here five days a week," he said.

He wasn't certain what he would consider his favorite class, but he recalls which one was the toughest.

"Philosophy - that was a hard one," he said.

At age 15, Zachary has plenty of time to formulate his own philosophies on life.

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